The Fourth Church Pulpit

GIVE IT ALL

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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Scripture: Romans 12:9-21, Mark 10:17-27

"... go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor ... then come, follow me." Mark 10:21 (NRSV)

Someone once asked Erma Bombeck if she saved up good ideas so she'd be able to write at least one strong column per week.

She answered in a column, "What's Saved is Often Lost," which, unlikely as it is, I propose as a secondary text this morning.

Miss Bombeck wrote:

> "I don't save anything. My pockets are empty at the end of a week. So is my gas tank. So is my file of ideas. I trot out the best I've got, and come the next week, I bargain, whimper, make promises, cower and throw myself on the mercy of the Almighty for just three more columns in exchange for cleaning my oven.
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> "I didn't get to this point overnight. I came from a family of savers who were sired by poverty and ... worshiped at the altar of self-denial.
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> "Throughout the years, I've seen a fair number of my family who have died leaving candles that have never been lit, appliances that never got out of the box ....
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> "It gets to be a habit.
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> "I have learned that silverware tarnishes when it isn't used, perfume turns to alcohol, candles melt in the attic over the summer, and ideas that are saved for a dry week often become dated.
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> "I always had a dream that when I am asked to give an accounting of my life to a higher court, it will be like this: 'So, empty your pockets. What have you got left of your life? Any dreams that were unfilled? Any unused talent that we gave you when you were born that you still have left? Any unsaid compliments or bits of love that you haven't spread around?'
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> "And, I will answer, 'I've nothing to return. I spent everything you gave me. I'm as naked as the day I was born.'"

One time a young man asked Jesus a similar question. He is, I think, one of the most authentic characters in the New Testament. I know this young man—this first century Young Urban Professional from Jerusalem. He's hard working, successful, responsible, volunteers some in his spare time and he's doing well, very well financially. But there is something missing in his life, an empty restlessness, something T. S. Eliot once described in a poe—"We are the hollow men," something Arthur Miller described so poignantly in *Death of a Salesman,* something St. Augustine meant when he wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

What a moment when a wealthy young man runs up to Jesus, a poor, itinerate Rabbi, kneels before him and asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" What follows is intriguing: "Obey the law," Jesus says; "keep the commandments."

"I do that," the young man answers. "I've been keeping the commandments all my life and I'm still empty."

Jesus likes that. This man's wholesome innocence, honest inquisitiveness, courageous vulnerability, make him a ry winsome character. He has all the promise of a truly great one. Even his religion assures him: his wealth is evidence of God's blessing. So, what's wrong with him? Why doesn't he feel good about himself? Jesus looks at him again, *loves* him and says, "You lack one thing. Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, come follow me."

Jesus doesn't say that to everybody, by the way. It is his prescription for a particular young man who, when he hears it, is sad, the text says. Appalled is more like it, don't you imagine? Sell it all—give it all? Who could do a thing like that? Maybe some of it; maybe make a major, leadership gift to the campaign; maybe even tithe ten percent the income from his investments, after taxes, of course. But sell it all? Give it all? No way.

Barbara Brown Taylor says Christians mangle this text in one of two ways: by denying that it is about money and by thinking it is only about money.

Jesus, by the way, has a lot to say about the topic. Someone observed that he talks more about money than he does about heaven.

This is, first of all, about money, a topic about which Americans, and American Christians particularly, have a great deal of ambiguity. Two recent books explore the topic. Jacob Needleman is a professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University and he has written a book entitled *Money and the Meaning of Life* which has received national attention. He writes:

> "In no other culture or civilization that we know of has money been such a pervasive and decisive influence. In the world we now live in, money enters into everything human beings do, into every aspect and pocket of life. This is something new." [p. 2]

And I thought of the unfortunate place we have come to politically: that the prerequisite for mounting a successful political campaign is the ability to raise and spend an enormous amount of money: your own if you have it, or contributors or "political action committees," who believe in you—and who expect that you will remember their interests when you win and take office. And who can therefore threaten to withhold desperately needed money for the next elections, or worse, give it to your opponent, if you step out of line. It is the life-blood of the electoral process—money—and we still have the nerve to call it Democracy. I thought about how money dictates decisions: in preserving hard mineral mining rights for western coporations, and the gun lobby in Texas, and the fabulously althy Christian Coalition in Virginia and Harry and Louise on health care reform and the eloquent fact that campaign reform promised, discussed, debated, was at the very last minute filibustered to death. Needleman is dead right. Nowhere else in the world - or in history - does money have that kind of influence.

> "We live in an affluent society" he says. "This means not only that we have much material wealth, but that we want this wealth more than we want everything else." [p. 22]

But, says this professor of philosophy, it doesn't do for us what we want. It doesn't make us happy or free or immortal or even content. In fact, he proposes that our desire for money is a kind of self-imposed hell. In a chapter entitled, "The New Poverty: Life in Hell," he writes

> "Hell is the state in which we are barred from receiving what we truly need because of the value we give to what we merely want." [p. 27]

Robert Wuthnow, a Princeton sociologist, agrees. Wuthnow has become an expert on the topic of how Americans, including American church people, express their values by *their* use of their money. In his recent book, *God and Mammon in America,* he observes that we are a deeply religious people,

> "But we are also passionately committed to the almighty dollar. We devote the bulk of our waking hours to earning it and much of the rest of our time finding ways to spend it."

"Sell it all. Give it all." It's a kind of ultimate counter culture mandate, is it not? What would happen if we all did it? What about our obligations, our bills, our responsibility to our families and communities and colleges and museums? Does Jesus actually propose that we exercise no responsibility for our future? families? institutions? Or his Jesus' prescription for this young man alone? What would his prescription be for you and me? What would he tell you and me that we need to do to inherit eternal life or to be fully and completely alive now? Would it not be different for each of us? Would he not, with his mysterious precision, his sense of the center, would he not identify

whatever it is in which you and I have invested our hopes and dreams, and are counting on to save us; our career, our success, our influence, our power, our personal appearance? Would he not tell us what he told that winsome young man, namely to release our grip, to open our hands to let it go and to come, follow.

Robert Wuthnow scolds the mainline Christian Church for not wrestling with this issue. Wuthnow says Americans are asking basic questions of meaning and purpose, perhaps as never before. And he thinks the churches are failing them precisely because of ambiguity and lack of nerve. Jesus didn't ask for a modest contribution to the cause: he apparently wanted this man's heart and soul. It's a long way, Wuthnow cracks, between the kind of pathetic pleading that goes on in churches over a percentage point increase in pledge commitments and Jesus' invitation to take up your cross and follow.

We are caught in this dilemma. We are not a tight band of twelve or twenty deeply committed persons. We are a public church in a "Culture of Disbelief" and we are theologically diverse and we attempt to be home for the passionately devoted, the mildly interested, the curious, the seeker. And it would be wrong, I think, to respond to the person asking, perhaps for the first time, about God and the meaning of life, by suggesting that he start the process by making a generous financial pledge. And yet, is not part of the crisis of religion in our culture precisely our ambiguity about this matter of sacrifice and commitment; our inclination to present the Gospel of Christ as a set of opinions, not much different from other opinions, a perspective for consideration, and the mission of the church as a set of modestly helpful activities, rather than a faithful representation of one who said—Sell it all—Give it all?

The result of our ambiguity is something called "Consumer Religion," religion designed with the customer in mind. First you study the target market, design a product to meet what your market has said it wants and will pay for, and then program it: boutique religion, something for everyone, with child care for all, and plenty of parking—at least that's not a temptation—or even a remote possibility for us!

> "What we have in this culture," says Tom Long of Princeton, "is a kind of bland religious liberalism, long on tolerance, short on loyalty, channel surfing across the religious spectrum of the United States, selecting those options that match their life-styles and meet their personal wants." [*Theology Today*, July 94, p. 199]

The wealthy young man who came to Jesus asking about life, in a way, I think represents everyone of us. He has succeeded professionally, financially. In addition, he has been successful religiously. He has done everything his religion told him to do all his life. He is at the end of the line ... he doesn't know what else to do to produce the experience he wants and needs. And what is that?—satisfaction, wholeness, oneness with the world, with his own life, with God, a sense that he's living his life as purposefully and meaningfully as he can ...

The radical message of Christian faith is that what we truly need is offered to us as a gift ... God's love, God's forgiveness, God's acceptance.

The radical personal implication, of course, is that you have to be able to accept the gift in order to receive it. I love the way Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

> "You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hand to take it with. You cannot make room for it if your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are not free to go." [op. cit., p. 125]

And so, what we have here is the possibility of a very different way of living life and relating to our resources. What we have here is a whole new way of living which is intentionally unattached to all the things the culture says we absolutely must have in order to live.

Do you ever find yourself withholding ... withholding your love, for instance, and then later regretting that you didn't express it? Did you ever fail to give a gift because of frugality and then regretted it? Did you ever not give yourself totally to someone or something and later wished you had?

I confess—I'm a saver ... I still have my class notes from Freshman Geology. A domestic crisis occurred once when someone discarded my ninth-grade leaf notebook ... Sometimes in the process of preparing a sermon, I have a

The promise, which Jesus made to his perplexed friends, is that though the demand to give it all away is impossible, with God all things are possible, a little more so, I think, when our hands are open.

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Great God of love, for all your gifts, we thank you. For our resources, be they great or modest, for the love of friends and families, for the common gifts of beauty and kindness and affection, we thank you. Teach us to open our hands, to release our grip, and to be receptive to the love you have for us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.